

BORIS MITIC INTERVIEW

in European Documentary Network's "DOX MAGAZINE", May 2008

by Ulla Jacobsen

## THE BELGRADE JOY FACTORY

I am in a car in Belgrade with a handful of young Serbian filmmakers and producers on our way to lunch during the *Magnificent 7* festival. Suddenly one of the women points out of the window to a large building – a target of the 1999 NATO bombings. A couple of men are in the process of rolling down a huge, 20x70m “Coca Cola – the Joy Factory” advertising banner on the completely bombed out building. She immediately picks up her phone and calls Boris Mitić. Boris is working on a film about Serbian satirical aphorisms, and here is a visual he has to film.

A few days later I meet Boris for a talk about Serbian docs. He is 30 years old, but he feels he already lived a rich life, courtesy of all the extremes he experienced by simply living in Serbia: a (post)communist childhood, the bloody break-up of three countries, total economic embargo, the biggest hyperinflation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, soft dictatorship, hardcore neoliberalism, 15 months of warfare, hundreds of street riots and a fair share of arrests, injuries and other life-threatening adventures. With this life experience he and his fellow filmmakers have so many stories to tell from the country they live in, but very few international documentary films are made in Serbia. Most of the stories we hear from Serbia are told by others – by foreigners. That is something that Boris is not too pleased with, and being one of the few very successful Serbian documentary filmmakers, he is determined to propose “something completely different”.

After the huge international success of his “accidental” debut film “Pretty Dyana” (80+ festivals, 13 awards, 15 broadcasters), he has been working for three years now on “Aphocalypse Now”, a feature-length documentary about Serbian satirical aphorisms – those “sharp proverbs with a twist” or “half-truths which reveal the truth and a half” that represent “the best antidote to life Serbia has to offer”.

The short synopsis reads: “The first documentary on the sophisticated kind of humor which enraged Tito and the communists, ridiculed Milosevic and the nationalists and soothed our way through transition and the Eurocrats. Like it or not, you are also in there”.

With this film he hopes to provide “a more unrealistic picture” of Serbia and the Serbs than the one we know from the media.

BM: “There are all these clichés against Serbia that we constantly have to fight against...”

[They come from the more or less unfair media portrayal of Serbia in the last 20 years, and it is sometimes very difficult to go against that flow, to propose ideas which would make great films, but are labeled “political incorrect” in terms of a very specific agenda that is predominant in certain political and broadcasting circles. Even more so, it is as difficult to make films that are challenging the official policy as it is to film stories which don't have any political connotation, because this also goes “against audience expectations”.]

Any kind of story we propose internationally first has to go through this political and ideological scanner, and since this scanner is out of tune, there is a big problem. Many filmmakers make the mistake of adapting to this scanner and they make the films that the Western CEs want to watch,

which are not very close to reality but close to the clichés of reality. At best, they sell some offbeat, tragicomical stories with Fellini-esque characters at the end of which the average Westerner sighs with relief: “Ah, those Balkans...”

People here are not different than anywhere else in the world, we are just very stubborn in not accepting the superficial mainstream version of the last 20 years of history, because we think reality is far more complex than what you have been told. Everybody here will say: OK, we admit our mistakes, but don't forget the other guys and don't forget your own (Western) responsibility as well. But as soon as you say such a thing, you close all the doors in front of you.

If you try to be moralistic, nobody listens. If you try to put things into context, you are labeled a nationalist. If you accept the blame but want to share it with the others, you are a nationalist-behind-the-veil. We feel trapped from all sides, and that's why I choose satire to transcend this.

Satire is great because you can slap people in the face and make them laugh at the same time. In my film, everybody will be dead in the end: First I shoot at ourselves, but just as you start laughing and feeling smart, you realize that you have also been fatally wounded, and we all die with a happy smile on the face.

UJ: What is the main audience for Serbian films - Serbian or international?

BM: I think the Serbs deserve to have documentary films that they can enjoy and recognize themselves in. I have watched almost everything that has been made on Serbia by foreigners in the last 10 years and I couldn't recognize my personal story in any of those films. I also watched a lot of things being made domestically, but I have to admit that I wasn't pleased with that either... Generally speaking, making a film about Serbia that would satisfy the domestic audience remains a great challenge and a crucial criteria for a good film. I always tell my friends: Test your story ideas on both locals and internationals, and make it a film only if both are excited by the idea.

On the other hand, the international audience can learn a lot from our experience, because we have lived through so many extremes in a very condensed period of time. Big civilizational clashes, geopolitical, technological, ideological... have all happened very fast here, and they created a great deal of locally universal stories that anyone could relate to. So yes, Serbian docmaking definitely has a strong international potential.

UJ: Why aren't there more documentary filmmakers doing like you?

BM: Documentary filmmakers in Serbia are doing too few things too fast. With a few notable exceptions, they treat documentaries as extended pieces of TV journalism or as short films with a storyboarded, poetic trick. They stopped following international trends maybe 20 years ago and don't seem ready or willing to accept the 52min/feature-length documentary standards, with all the time, investment, research energy and sacrifice that they imply.

The main reason is the lack of access to the international documentary scene. TV slots are completely occupied by reality shows and doc series on animals and popular history. It is so bad that young people associate documentary films with giraffes and animated maps, until they finally get to see some films like these (those on *Magnificent 7*, ed.), and then they are completely amazed.

Things are slowly changing, though... Thanks to festivals and, let's admit it, internet piracy, author-driven documentaries are reaching a wider audience. And the more quality docs filmmakers see, the more they will understand the new rules of the game and the potential of our own documentary films.

[In terms of support, domestic TV broadcasters don't pre-buy nor co-produce documentaries, but at least they can offer good archives. The Serbian Ministry of Culture and the City of Belgrade have only recently started putting money into documentary films. I got support from both funds for "Aphocalypse Now" – including the first money ever allocated to a feature-length doc – so I really should not complain, but mine is a rather exceptional story.

Conversely, we need quality doc producers who would alleviate the burden of fundraising from the authors, since most author-driven docs nowadays are currently self-produced.]

UJ: The way you work with your films now, is it immediately to look for European money?

BM: I always start with my own money, then I apply to domestic funds and contact the CEs I've previously worked with, but I keep filming all along. Money comes sooner or later, but it is always the energy and the ideas that count.

One advice that I would give to people who can't fill up their budgets is to try to adapt the dramaturgy of their film to whatever real constraint they have, both technical and financial. There is always a way to make a film, whatever your limitations are. There is simply no excuse for that. And without wanting to side up with selfish producers and stingy commissioners, I would add that these limitations can sometimes lead to very creative solutions.

In the end, it is really the satisfaction of doing the exact documentary that you want that makes it worth every sleepless night, every cup of sweat and every burnt banknote. The best (and only) aphorism I ever invented myself says it all: "I live from the money that I am losing by making films."

*Boris Mitić is a Belgrade-based documentary filmmaker, author of PRETTY DYANA (2003), UNMIK TITANIK (2004) and GOODBYE, HOW ARE YOU? (in production)*  
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